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Viewing cable 07ISTANBUL353, A GATHERING OF GULENISTS, WITH A SPLASH OF SCOTCH

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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| 07ISTANBUL353 | 2007-04-27 14:41 | 2011-08-30 01:44 | CONFIDENTIAL | Consulate Istanbul |

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.taraf.com.tr/haber/abd-belgelerinde-fethullah-gulen.htm>

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000353

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SUBJECT: A GATHERING OF GULENISTS, WITH A SPLASH OF SCOTCH

REF: ISTANBUL 209

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. An April 17 gathering of journalists,

academicians, religious and political leaders either merely familiar with, sympathetic to or loyal followers of Fethullah Gulen painted a picture of the self-exiled, U.S.-based Turkish religious leader as a compassionate and tolerant humanitarian committed to reconciliation, both within Turkey's various religious and social groups and throughout the world at large. Our sources attributed the evasiveness associated with Gulenist visa applicants to a fear that USG officials share a prejudice against them similar to what they've experienced with the Turkish government. These interlocutors opined that Gulen would have no problem returning to Turkey prior to November's parliamentary elections if PM Erdogan were to become president (this was prior to Thursday's announcement that FM Gul would step into that role). A media glitch may help explain Gulen's rumored links to the USG. End summary.

THE GUESTS

¶2. (C) An eclectic group of Turks knowledgeable of and/or sympathetic to religious leader Fethullah Gulen - reverentially called "The Hoca" (HO-jah) by his followers - joined us for dinner at the CGR April 17. The guests, selected by Nazli Ilicak, herself a rather notorious figure in Turkish political life as a Scotch-swilling, Justice and Justice and Development Party (AKP) co-founder of industrialist pedigree, who was expelled from parliament and later exonerated by the European Court of Human Rights, included well-known Turkish columnists Mustafa Akyol (Turkish Daily News), Fehmi Koru (Yeni Safak), and Ali Bulac (Zaman); academics Niyazi Oktem, professor of Sociology at Bilgi University, his son, Emre, who teaches law at Galatasaray University; Mahmut Kilic, theology instructor at Marmara University; sociologist (and daughter of Turkish writer Cemil Meric) Umit Meric; and Alparslan Acikgenc, Dean of the Faculty of Letters at Fatih University. Secretary General of the Turkish Catholic Episcopal Conference Monsignor Georges Marovitch also made the guest list, as did Harun Tokak, president of the Journalists and Writers Foundation.

GULEN THE HUMANIST IMAM

¶3. (C) Harun Tokak, described by those around the table as being "closest" to the Hoca, recounted his attendance as a young man in the late 1960's and early 1970's at a mosque in Izmir where Gulen served as imam. Gulen's preaching was unique in Tokak's experience for its vibrancy, warmth and genuineness. Though entirely self-educated beyond primary school, according to Niyazi Oktem, the young Gulen talked of building schools, not mosques. Inspired by Gulen's genuine piety and depth of character, derived from his developing, moderate Sufi interpretation of scripture, Tokak moved to Van in eastern Turkey where he opened a school that has since served as springboard for the hundreds if not thousands of schools that have since followed (reftel). Today, the original "Gulenist" school in Van serves over 1000 students.

GULEN'S THEOLOGICAL BASIS

¶4. (C) Our guests placed Gulen in sharp contrast to their somewhat stereotypical ideas of strict "Arab (read: Saudi Salafist) Islam" and squarely within what they deem a uniquely "Turkish" Sufi tradition that emphasizes purity of the heart and a realization of one's whole self in God. Niyazi Oktem and Fehmi Koru joined others in explaining Gulen's appeal to followers drawn to his teaching and the man himself because the Hoca addressed real spiritual needs, and did not simply repeat Diyanet-prescribed scripts. His interpretive approach to the Koran - freed from strict adherence to the Arabic text - provided space for individual expressions of piety, and for reconciliation with Christians, Jews and even non-believers. One guest, who chose relatively late in life to cover, recounted in terms not unfamiliar to evangelical Christians how Gulen's preaching and his individualized ministry had changed her life and led to a

deeper faith. Imam Gulen "retired" from the Diyanet in the early 1980s to begin a ministry independent of Turkey's official state-sponsored bureau of religion.

INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES AND MEETING THE POPE

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¶5. (C) Monsignor Marovitch spoke enthusiastically and at length about his own efforts to promote Gulen's ecumenical agenda, including introductions to other faith community leaders and ultimately Pope John Paul II. Marovitch and others confirmed the Hoca's early ties to a wealthy Jewish-Turkish businessman, Uzayr Garih, found murdered in a Muslim cemetery several years ago, who worked with Marovitch to link Gulen to a broader audience in the interest of interfaith dialogue and world peace. Marovitch said he'd arranged for Gulen to meet the Pope only to find that Turkey's Mission to the Vatican had cancelled the appointment. (Note: This contrasts with earlier accounts that Garih, in fact, introduced Gulen to Abe Foxman, who in turn introduced him to the Cardinal of New York, who in turn introduced him to the Pope. End note.) Marovitch said he strenuously reclama'd that decision and the audience took place, which raised the GOT's ire. Marovitch attributed later suspicions of U.S. government involvement to press inaccuracies in reporting that then-U.S. Ambassador to Turkey "Abramowitz" - vice "Marovitch" - had arranged the meeting. Istanbul's Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Armenian Patriarch Mesrob also met with Fethullah Gulen, according to Niyazi Oktem and other sources. Gulen subsequently traveled to the U.S. for medical treatment in February 1999 and has stayed ever since.

THE "TURKISH NATURE" OF GULENIST SCHOOLS

¶6. (C) Turkey and its culture feature heavily in the Gulenist curriculum, according to Niyazi Oktem. Harun Tokak recounted that a retired but skeptical Turkish military general was once persuaded to visit Gulenist schools in Central Asia; he came away satisfied the group meant no harm to Turkey and was probably a positive. Our guests in turn explained the schools' emphasis on exploring Turkish culture, and the historical "melting pot - just like America" represented by the Ottoman Empire and its ethnic and cultural mix. Oktem - being "deliberately provocative but accurate," noted that Turks are "more Greek than Arab." In other words, there was nothing to fear.

¶7. (C) Several guests noted that instead of building on the reforming and modernizing traditions of the Ottoman period, which could serve to guide Turkey in its current situation, the Republic's early leaders had chosen to discard everything, including the relatively moderate brand of Islam practiced during that period. Their authoritarian approach to the "new Turkey" had stifled existing and "natural" reforming impulses. Mustafa Akyol cited, for example, a "women's movement" in the late Ottoman period stifled and "reformed" by the leaders of the new Republic, who believed they needed to prescribe even to the women what they should and should not want. This had led to an artificial society and the potential for backlash. The Gulenist movement was an effort to return to Turkey's natural, multi-ethnic, tolerant roots, allowing for the spiritual component that has always been there.

FUNDING, FOLLOWERS AND GULEN'S CURRENT STATUS

¶8. (C) In response to our questions about funding, numbers of adherents, the Gulenist "organization," if any, and the Hoca's personal status and possible return to Turkey, we heard alternately straightforward and vague replies, suggesting some facts may simply be unknown. Our guests

estimated Gulen's followers in Turkey to number between two and three million, based in part on the 800,000 known subscribers to a Gulenist magazine. The subscription journal Sizinti also serves as the primary means of communicating theological tenets to the faithful, broadly supplemented by the Internet. Gulen's speeches also are carried in his "Zaman" daily newspaper, printed in Turkey and in the U.S. in English. Though vague on amounts, our guests asserted that the organization itself holds no stockpiles of funds and that schools and other activities generally are financed by well-heeled businessmen. With wicked smiles, some of our guests noted rumors widely believed among Turks that the CIA was funding the Hoca, whom the U.S. reportedly had set up in the first place. When asked why U.S.-bound visa applicants appeared almost uniformly evasive about their intent to either visit the Hoca or to attend a Gulenist school, our interlocutors responded that the applicants - over whom they exercised no control - were simply ignorant of U.S. visa procedures and feared that U.S. government officials held prejudices against the organization similar to the Turkish government's.

¶9. (C) Personal details on Gulen were a bit harder to come by aside from the hagiography of his early life; we never

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heard a clear answer, for example, regarding his marital status.

WILL HE RETURN?

¶10. (C) We asked why the Hoca remained in the U.S., with so many followers here. Were there security or health concerns?

Those closest to him said he would have no difficulty returning to Turkey following a presumed AKP (and at the time, Erdogan) presidential victory in May 2007, and prior to November's parliamentary elections, downplaying rumors of outstanding criminal charges or threats from ultranationalist factions. That said, health considerations might preclude the elderly leader's being "set upon" by thousands of his adherents, according to our sources, and so he might choose to remain in the U.S. In this context, some voiced concern Gulen might be asked to depart the U.S. for political or immigration purposes. A few appeared to be very conversant with his drawn out immigration case and appeals process.

(Note: Having originally entered on a "B-2" visa for medical treatment in February 1999, Gulen subsequently acquired an "R" (nonimmigrant) visa, as a religious leader, but reportedly failed to pay income taxes/maintain status. An attempt to get legal permanent resident status through a religious worker petition seems to have been rejected by USCIS. His lawyers reportedly are seeking "O" status, which would allow him to remain as an individual of outstanding ability. End note.)

¶11. (C) Comment. This impressive group of academic, religious and professional admirers and followers offers a portrait of Fethullah Gulen that is light years away from secularist perceptions of a scheming crypto-Mullah, plotting to turn Turkey into a sharia-based Islamic state little different than Iran. They clearly believe Gulen is a model of enlightened Islam, amenable to and compatible with present-day Turkish life and the modern world, and perhaps even necessary to avoid Turkey's exploitation by radicalized elements on both sides. They attribute Gulen's difficulties with Turkey's secular state apparatus to the latter's need to "control everything," citing the GOT's aversion to the word "ecumenical" in the Greek Orthodox patriarchal title as an example of this narrow-mindedness. Most impressive was the example of tolerance and collegiality amongst themselves, a clearly diverse group some of whom drank alcohol, others who abstained, some who covered, others who did not. End comment.

JONES